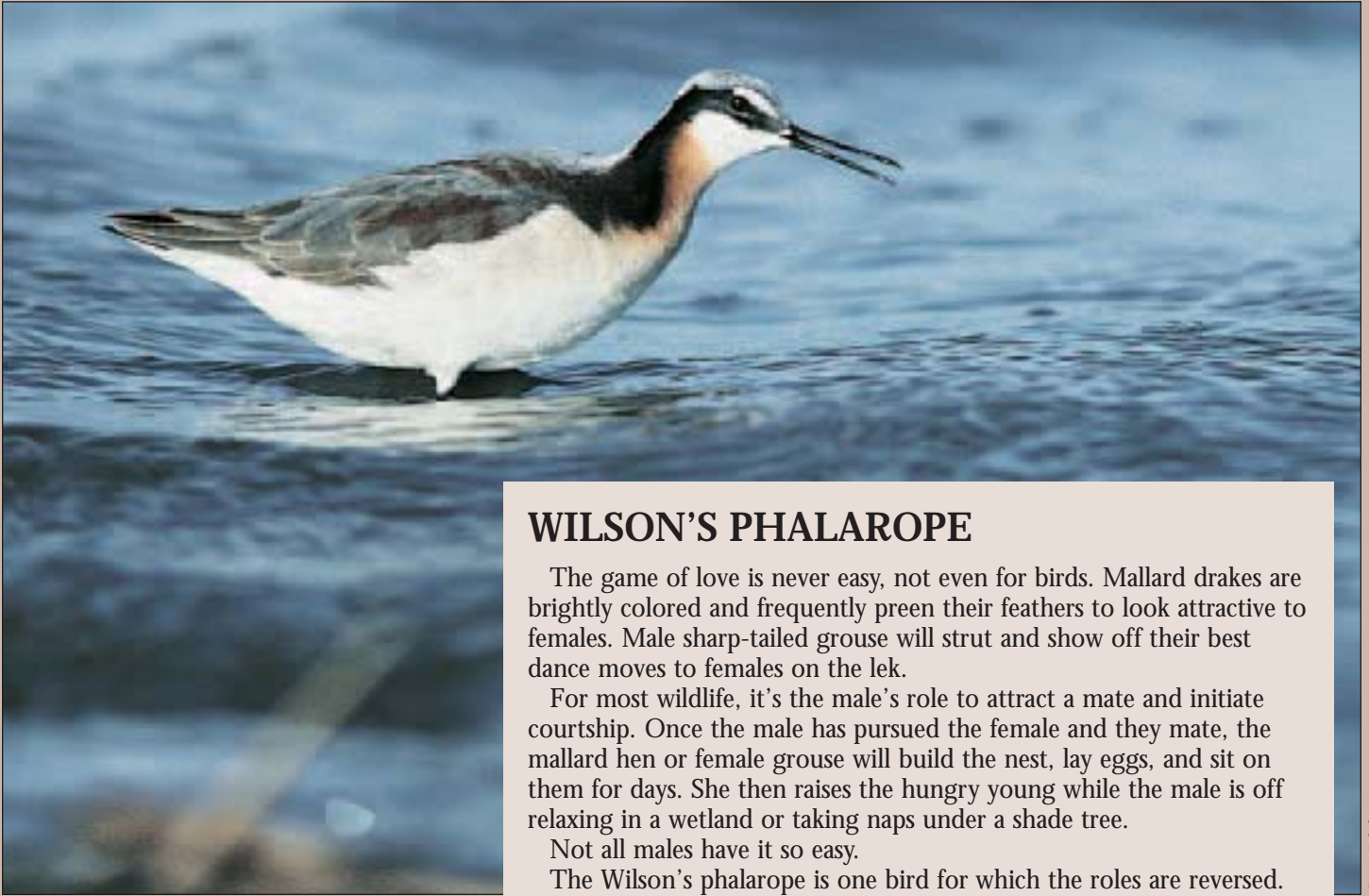


# A CLOSER LOOK

By Sandra Hagen



Craig Bihrie

## WILSON'S PHALAROPE

The game of love is never easy, not even for birds. Mallard drakes are brightly colored and frequently preen their feathers to look attractive to females. Male sharp-tailed grouse will strut and show off their best dance moves to females on the lek.

For most wildlife, it's the male's role to attract a mate and initiate courtship. Once the male has pursued the female and they mate, the mallard hen or female grouse will build the nest, lay eggs, and sit on them for days. She then raises the hungry young while the male is off relaxing in a wetland or taking naps under a shade tree.

Not all males have it so easy.

The Wilson's phalarope is one bird for which the roles are reversed. Wilson's phalaropes are medium-sized shorebirds that winter in southern South America and migrate north to the Great Plains to breed in grasslands in summer. The females are slightly larger than the males, measuring in at about nine inches long, sport a 17-inch wingspan and weigh only about two ounces. Female phalaropes are brightly colored with a brownish-red and gray back and a striking black streak running from the eyes down to a light cinnamon neck. A snowy white throat and belly accent her colorful outfit. Male phalaropes have two colors: light gray and white.

During breeding season, female phalaropes initiate courtship. They seek a male, court him, and defend him from other intruding females. Eventually, the male gives in to her advances and they mate.

Then it gets difficult for the male. He builds the nest where the female typically lays four eggs. Then he'll sit on the nest for about 20 days, and raise the young after hatching. The female, all the while, may relax nearby in a wetland – certainly a good deal for her gender.

While feeding, Wilson's phalaropes will often spin, almost like a top, churning up food from the bottom of shallow wetlands, such as mosquito larvae, diving beetles and other tiny aquatic animals.

Wilson's phalaropes arrive in North Dakota in mid-April to early May, and hang around until mid-August to early September. When you recognize the brightly colored female resting in a wetland, remember there is a hardworking male sitting on a nest or raising young somewhere nearby.

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